

South Perth's Old Mill: Historical attraction hosted Perth's first rooftop bar

Keren Bellos - Southern Gazette
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It's a little known fact that the first drinks at a WA rooftop bar flowed more than 140 years ago.

In 1880, architect and convicted forger Thomas "Satan" Browne – who earned the nickname for his goatee – leased the Old Mill in South Perth, transforming the windmill that originally produced 680kg of flour daily for the fledgling colony into the short-lived Alta Pleasure Gardens hotel.

"He added verandahs and cut off its dome to build a viewing platform," City of South Perth local history librarian Anthony Styan said while sharing some of the iconic landmark's historical highlights.

"People will also be surprised to learn that it is the second mill to stand on the site.



The reopening celebration marked another chapter in the life of the historic buildings.
Credit: The City of South Perth

“English engineer William Shenton first constructed a little wooden windmill there in 1833, which was raided by Binjareb Noongar people of the Murray River region – now Mandurah more or less – and the back and forth conflict after that is one of the precursors for the Pinjarra Massacre.”

Built in 1835, the Old Mill alongside the Narrows Bridge is now the state’s second oldest colonial building, trumped by only the Round House in Fremantle, and has also served as a base for WA Water Police, an artist’s retreat, a poultry farm and a residence.

The City of South Perth and Hocking Heritage + Architecture have just completed an extensive restoration of the mill and adjacent brick miller’s cottage in Melville Place, with a reopening celebration late last month attracting about 400 visitors.



The degraded remains of Thomas "Satan" Browne's additions could be seen at the mill circa 1916. Credit: The City of South Perth

The third and most significant repairs in the buildings’ history, it involved restoring timber joinery, major rehabilitation to the limestone and bricks, repainting walls and the addition of new shingles and sails.

“It wasn’t a matter of returning it to its original state, so visitors can see the many different layers of how it’s been used and renovated over the years,” Mr Styan said.

For Quinns Rocks resident Annette Dawson, the mill was once home to her great-great-granddad, Thomas Hamilton, who migrated from England to WA in 1855.

“He was in the 16th Cavalry Brigade, the Queen’s Own Regiment, and he was in charge of the Mt Eliza convict depot at the time,” she said.

Thornlie resident Lois Green recalled when her late father, Stuart Sharpe, worked at Brisbane and Wunderlich (later roofing company Bristile), which repaired the buildings, created a folk museum and set up a products display while leasing the site from 1957-1992.



The buildings circa 1940, many years before Brisbane and Wunderlich performed the first major restoration at the site. Credit: The City of South Perth

“As Brisbane and Wunderlich’s accountant and a City of South Perth councillor, I believe he instigated the buildings’ first major rejuvenation,” she said.

“Later, he arranged for my husband Ron and I to have our wedding photos taken there, which was quite an honour because it wasn’t open to the public then.

“I remember dad being chuffed that he was able to organise it for us.”

Mr Styan said the mill was one of the best locations to go for a look at WA’s past.



The 186-year-old flour mill's historical value has been protected following major

conservation works by the City of South Perth and Hocking Heritage + Architecture. Credit: The City of South Perth

“There’s really relatively few sites that are so immediate and it’s one of the very few places in Perth where you can stand there and enjoy multiple centuries of history in one vista,” he said.

“You’ve got indigenous history, colonial history, convict history and modern engineering history all in one spot.”



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Visit the City’s website for the Old Mill’s opening hours.

People can share their mill stories, photos and memorabilia with the City of South Perth via localhistory@southperth.wa.gov.au